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Congress and the Marine Corps

An Enduring Partnership

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Abstract: During the past 75 years, the U.S. Marine Corps has cultivated and sustained a close working relationship with Congress. This article surveys historical examples from the post–World War II defense unification debates and from the post–Vietnam War era to explore the role Congress plays in military innovation as well as the importance of congressional oversight.

Keywords: Congress, Office of Legislative Affairs, Marine Corps, civil-military relations, defense unification, Vietnam War, congressional oversight

During the past 75 years, the U.S. Marine Corps has earned a reputation as the most politically adept of the armed Services, particularly on Capitol Hill.¹ As a fighting force, the Marine Corps is atypical in its mission, force structure, and size. It serves as the nation's expeditionary force in readiness by combining air, ground, and support assets into task-organized teams. As a separate Service within the Department of the Navy, the Marine Corps has an amphibious focus and partners with the U.S. Navy to project military power from the sea. Although it is not uncommon for maritime nations to maintain small contingents of naval infantry, the United States is the only country that has a Service of more than 180,000 members explicitly devoted to overseas expeditionary operations. Because its roles and missions overlap with those of the other Services, on at least 10 separate occasions, the Marine Corps

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has had to counter efforts by executive branch officials, often aided and abetted by U.S. Army officers, to abolish the Corps or limit its size or autonomy.²

To protect itself, the Marine Corps made a focused effort to cultivate critical legislators and form bipartisan coalitions on issues relevant to the Service. In the process, it aligned itself more closely to the U.S. Congress than the other Services. In the decades since World War II, the Marine Corps has fostered and sustained similar relationships and used them to increase its influence within the national security establishment. Perhaps the best-known example occurred during the defense unification debates following World War II. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Corps used connections and intrigue to form a powerful congressional coalition that not only ensured the Corps' survival as an institution but also wrote its mission and force structure into law.

Nevertheless, Congress has periodically used its oversight role and power over the budget to pressure the Marine Corps to reform and innovate.³ In the 1970s, for example, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the Marine Corps was an institution in crisis. Problems included recruiting malpractice, recruit abuse, widespread misconduct in the ranks, and the lack of a clear mission. Time and again, Congress made its concerns known to Headquarters Marine Corps through legislation, hearings, policy papers, and by informal means. In the process, Congress pushed the Marine Corps to raise its standards and redefine its strategic relevance. At the same time, we should be careful to not view this as a case of political leaders driving innovation from outside the Service. The Marine Corps was most likely to change when pressure from without combined with recognition of a problem from within led Headquarters Marine Corps, and most importantly the Commandant, to embrace solutions that were acceptable to a critical mass of Marines.⁴

Historically, the Marine Corps as an institution has tended to give itself credit for any and all favorable changes. Marines view themselves as being innovative by nature. In *First to Fight*, General Victor H. Krulak's passionate treatise on Marine Corps history and values, the author identified an "innovative quality" as being "a vital part of the Marine Corps personality."⁵ In truth, while the Marine Corps has been innovative in specific areas and at particular points in time—amphibious warfare in the interwar period, for example—the notion that the Service is inherently innovative is a myth. As an institution, the Marine Corps is conservative by nature in the sense that it has often been highly resistant to change. For change to occur, it takes a concerted effort by concerned Marines, former Marines, and friends of the Corps in Congress. Again, this is not to say that the Corps has not been innovative on numerous occasions, but that the role of outside pressure, particularly from Congress, has been underappreciated, if not ignored, in many cases.

In an attempt to better understand the powerful connection between Con-

gress and the Marine Corps, this article examines both the high points and the low points and offers some observations as to why the relationship has been so productive. It makes two main arguments. First, congressional oversight of the Marine Corps is a good thing. It need not be adversarial, and historically, it has not been. If anything, it is more collaborative than combative. In military parlance, the American people and their representatives in Congress are the Corps' center of gravity, or in other words, its source of strength. Oversight allows for the public's voice to be heard and it makes for a stronger Marine Corps, one that is more closely aligned with the American people. Second, and most importantly, the Marine Corps' political power has been a direct result of the value Marines placed on building and sustaining personal relationships. In an age of hyper-partisanship and instantaneous, yet often faceless, digital communications, this case is instructive. In times of crises, the Marine Corps drew on close personal relationships built on a strong foundation of trust, camaraderie, and a shared interest in the common defense.

The Good Times: The Unification Crisis, 1946–53

The most well-known example of the Corps building a powerful congressional coalition occurred during the defense unification debates that surrounded the passage of the National Security Act of 1947 and subsequent legislation. In late 1945 and early 1946, senior War Department and executive branch officials, including President Harry S. Truman, expressed their support for various proposals that would drastically reduce the size of the Marine Corps. Advocates believed that shifting Marine Corps ground assets to the Army and air assets to an as-yet-to-be-created independent air force would increase efficiency and cut costs. If the Army had its way, the Corps would be reduced to a few regiments of light infantry. Throughout both the Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower administrations, the Marine Corps relied on its political power to resist efforts to minimize its place within the national defense establishment. Despite the efforts of both presidents, the Corps increased in size and influence. It did so by forming and sustaining a bipartisan congressional coalition.

Headquarters Marine Corps recognized that the only way to ensure the institution's survival, in anything close to resembling its World War II form, would be through statutory protections contained in congressional legislation. According to General Krulak, a major at the time, "Most emphatically, the Marines held as an article of faith that no Department of the Navy would be correctly constituted without a dynamic air/ground Marine Corps of size and composition adequate to fulfill the expeditionary/amphibious force-in-readiness role."⁶ The Service's size, roles, and missions had to be protected by law, but how to do so was not clear.

In 1947, Lieutenant Colonel Donald Hittle observed that "the biggest sur-

prise to me was the sudden realization that the Marine Corps actually did not have a single influential Congressman or Senator who could be contacted at any time on a personal basis and who could be relied on to comply with such requests for political actions as might be made to him.”⁷ The Marine Corps had potential allies, but had yet to approach them, nor was there a plan in place to do so.

Although space does not permit a full discussion of the ins and outs of the unification controversy, in summary, a group of Marine officers, at the direction of Headquarters Marine Corps, spent the next several months developing political connections and lobbying Congress to preserve the Corps. Of note, General Alexander A. Vandegrift, the 18th Commandant, went before Congress and delivered what became known as the “bended knee” speech. After acknowledging that Congress had repeatedly served as a safeguard against efforts to abolish the Corps, he remarked:

The Marine Corps feels that the question of its continued existence is likewise a matter for determination by the Congress and not one to be resolved by departmental legerdemain or a quasi-legislative process enforced by the War Department General Staff.

The Marine Corps, then, believes that it has earned this right—to have its future decided by the legislative body which created it—nothing more. . . . The bended knee is not a tradition of our Corps.⁸

In addition to preparing speeches for the Commandant, the team of officers, who jokingly referred to themselves as the “Chowder Society” after a famous comic strip, identified senators and congressmen who had either served in the Corps or had connections to the Corps and fostered relationships with them. The Chowder Society also worked with veterans’ organizations to influence Congress through constituent mail, issued press releases, and sought out sympathetic journalists.

Their campaign eventually resulted in the Marine Corps’ roles and missions being defined in the National Security Act of 1947, which read in part:

The Marine Corps shall be organized, trained and equipped to provide fleet marine forces of combined arms, together with supporting air components, for service with the fleet in the seizure and defense or defense of advanced naval bases and for the conduct of such land operations as may be essential to the prosecution of a naval campaign.⁹

Following Congress's efforts to save the Corps with the 1947 National Security Act, the Truman administration shifted course and sought to use its authority to reduce the Corps to irrelevance. For fiscal year (FY) 1951, Secretary of Defense Louis A. Johnson decreed the Corps would be cut down to six infantry battalions and six aviation squadrons. The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 and the need for combat-ready forces precluded Secretary Johnson from putting his plan into effect.

For the Corps' supporters on Capitol Hill, the Service's performance in the Korean War provided the justification needed for additional statutory protections. The Douglas-Mansfield Act (Public Law 416, 82d Congress), passed in June 1952 and commonly referred to as the Marine Corps Bill, amended the National Security Act of 1947 to give additional legislative support to the Service's amphibious orientation. Impressed by the Corps' rapid reinforcement of the Pusan Perimeter at the outset of the Korean War as well as its role in General Douglas MacArthur's brilliant landing at Inchon only months later, Congress mandated a permanent force structure of at least three active amphibious assault divisions and three air wings. The Marine Corps remains the only Service to have its minimum size and basic force structure written into law. However, three divisions and three wings do not imply any specific end strength; if Congress were so inclined, the divisions could be very small. Although it did not specify end strength, Public Law 416, which passed the House by an overwhelming majority of 253 to 30, was a significant victory for the Corps. It not only ensured the Service's survival in its World War II-era form, but it also gave the Commandant coequal status with the other Service chiefs when issues related to the Marine Corps were under consideration.

Some have questioned the Marine Corps' methods during the unification crisis. Foremost among them is historian Aaron B. O'Connell. In *Underdogs: The Making of the Modern Marine Corps*, O'Connell provides a thoroughly researched chapter on the three main groups who made up the Corps' coalition: Marine veterans holding office, members who never served but were friendly to the Corps, and Reserve officers who staffed key committees in their civilian capacities. While O'Connell notes the "unqualified success" the coalition achieved in protecting the Service, he is critical of the Corps for becoming "the most politically activist branch of the armed services" in the process and bemoans the extralegal means employed.¹⁰ He offers multiple examples of Headquarters Marine Corps and individual Marines overlooking rules on awards, promotions, political campaigning, and security procedures to increase the Service's political influence.¹¹ In his opinion, "They treated the legislative arena as a theater of war, seeing the other Services, particularly the Army, as the enemy. Survival was the only rule."¹² Interestingly, in a 2015 article, Brigadier General David J. Furness, then the legislative assistant to the Commandant, echoed O'Con-

nell's sentiments. Furness referred to Capitol Hill as a "battlespace" and the U.S. Congress as the Marine Corps' most important ally in the struggle for resources.¹³

In 1952, Headquarters Marine Corps established the Office of Legislative Affairs to cement its connection to Congress and put the relationship on a more solid legal foundation. In the words of the current legislative assistant for the Commandant, the office has been "directly responsible to the Commandant in order to ensure that the CMC's priorities and perspectives are understood on the Hill."¹⁴ The Office of Legislative Affairs (OLA) continues to inform legislation today, mainly through the annual National Defense Authorization Act, the federal law specifying the budget and expenditures for the Department of Defense as well as other defense-related provisions. The fact that the Commandant has his own liaison office is unique in comparison to the U.S. Army, Navy, and Air Force. For the other Services, the secretaries of their military departments, civilian political appointees, bear the primary responsibility for coordinating with Congress. The uniformed legislative liaisons work primarily for the civilian secretaries rather than their Service chiefs. The result is that the Commandant has a direct connection to Capitol Hill, while the other Service chiefs must coordinate legislative efforts with their respective secretaries.

An example of the Office of Legislative Affairs in action—and another well-known story of the Corps' political acumen—occurred in 1978 during the Commandancy of General Louis H. Wilson Jr. A Medal of Honor recipient who had served as legislative assistant a decade earlier, Wilson was adept at using his connections in Congress to gain support for Marine Corps policies and programs. Wilson also cultivated personal relationships through speaking engagements, visits, and correspondence. For example, he often spoke at functions hosted by a fellow Mississippian, Senator John C. Stennis, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Similarly, if high-ranking civilian officials attended a Marine Corps function, Wilson later sent personal notes along with photographs from the events. The typical picture showed the guests posed with Marines in their dress uniforms; if the photographer happened to catch the guests' children enjoying themselves with Marines, so much the better. It should be noted, however, that Wilson's network was not limited to those at the top. He made skillful use of the Congressional Marines, a bipartisan group made up of anyone who worked on Capitol Hill who had an interest in the Corps. The group included senators and representatives as well as interns, janitors, and security guards.¹⁵ Wilson and other key leaders made a habit of informally presenting initiatives at Congressional Marine breakfasts to foster support.

In 1978, General Wilson—working through his legislative assistant, Brigadier General Albert E. Brewster—used his influence in Congress to make

Figure 1. Senator John McCain (R-AZ) and U.S. Marine Corps Gen Joseph F. Dunford Jr., 36th Commandant of the Marine Corps, at the Home of the Commandants (8th and I), in Washington, DC, 8 May 2015



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo, courtesy LCpl Christopher J. Nunn.

the Commandant a full member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The relationship between the Commandant and the Joint Chiefs had long been a matter of contention. In March 1948, when the Service chiefs met in Key West, Florida, to define the roles and missions of the Services post–World War II, the Commandant was neither invited nor was his input solicited. In 1952, Public Law 416 made the Commandant a “co-equal” on any matter that “directly concerns the Marine Corps”; however, according to Title 10, the portion of U.S. Code pertaining to the armed forces, the Commandant was not a full member. In 1978, the issue came to a head when the chairman and all the Service chiefs, save Wilson, were slated to travel. Wilson expected to be acting chairman, but his peers told him that the vice chief of staff of the Air Force would fill the slot due to the Commandant not being a full member. Using his relationship with Senator Stennis, Wilson had an amendment drafted to correct the situation. The amendment making the Commandant a full member passed 89 to 3, and President James “Jimmy” Carter signed it into law on 20 October 1978.¹⁶ Additional legislation was passed to make the assistant commandant a four-star general, which gave the Corps two four-star billets. Wilson would later say of

Stennis, “He has been one of my greatest supports, I believe, and I certainly have been one of his.”¹⁷ Ultimately, these changes were significant because they made it possible for Marines to serve in positions at the highest levels of the armed forces, which included commanding combatant commands and serving as chairman and vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The years of the unification crisis had been difficult ones for the Marine Corps as an institution, yet Congress made significant strides to protect the Corps from being absorbed into the other Service branches. In *First to Fight*, General Krulak summed up the relationship between Congress and the Marine Corps in the early Cold War years:

Throughout the two hundred years of our country’s history, Congress has repeatedly acted to preserve and strengthen the Marines’ fighting effectiveness. The congressional determination, while enhanced by lobbying or jawboning, is primarily a product of one thing: confidence in the Corps’s performance. Without steady, reliable performance, year in and year out, Congress would never have so consistently stood by the Marines in their time of trial. Performance is what it is all about.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, Krulak makes no mention of the times when Congress had to step in and use its oversight function to correct deficiencies. Although not as well known as the unification crisis, there have been occasions when Congress lost confidence and took corrective action.

The Not-So-Good Times: The Post-Vietnam Era

The traditional narrative is that the Marine Corps focused inward and reformed itself in the years following the Vietnam War. According to this point of view, Marines were by far the most important agents of change in areas ranging from improving the overall quality of the force to defining the Service’s role in the later years of the Cold War. In reality, Congress played an essential role by pressing the Marine Corps to raise its standards and redefine its strategic relevance to the nation.

To meet the manpower needs of the Vietnam War, the Service repeatedly lowered its entrance standards. The reductions were similar to what had been done during World War II and the Korean War. Unlike in those conflicts, however, standards remained low after the Vietnam War ended. At the direction of General Robert E. Cushman Jr., Commandant from 1971 to 1975, the Service preserved its end strength at the expense of quality. Between 1969 and 1971, the Corps had shrunk from 317,000 to 204,000, and Cushman feared that if the latter number could not be maintained, Congress would make additional cuts.

When asked about his approach to manpower, Cushman described himself as fighting a rear-guard action in Congress based on the “the fear that if we simply refused to recruit enough people to come fairly close to filling up our authorized strength, that the Congress would soon cut the Corps to whatever we were able to maintain with our recruiting. And this was a decision that was very difficult to make because it meant you had to lower your standards somewhat to keep the number of people up to the near authorized strength.”¹⁹

The lower standards led to irregularities in recruiting and recruit training and drew unwanted attention from the media, the public, and ultimately Congress. On several occasions, constituents complained to Congress about fraudulent enlistments and the abuse of recruits. Of note, Congressman Mario A. Biaggi (D-NY), a highly decorated police officer, was alarmed that his constituents were being mistreated with “alarming regularity.” He considered the personnel issues plaguing the Corps to be a question of national security.²⁰ In 1971, Biaggi accompanied investigative reporters on fact-finding trips. The eventual result was a book-length account of the Corps’ troubles—*See Parris and Die: Brutality in the U.S. Marines*—that included an introduction by Biaggi urging the Marine Corps to act before it was too late. The observations of senior Marines supported Biaggi’s conclusions. While inspecting the medical facilities at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, South Carolina, in 1972, General Robert H. Barrow was shocked to learn that 23 recruits had been treated for broken jaws during the course of the year. Although the causes were listed as falls in the shower, Barrow knew that someone had mistreated the recruits. In his opinion, abuse “was just in the system” and the situation was “very bad” and “very wrong.”²¹ Another general officer was surprised at just how many “very stupid things” were being done at the depots.²² Headquarters Marine Corps refused to take action.

The situation came to a head on 4 December 1975, when recruit Lawrence Warner died of heat-related injuries only two days after arriving at Parris Island. Despite being overweight, he had been allowed to enlist and had not received a physical exam upon arriving at boot camp. Two days later, at Recruit Depot San Diego, recruit Lynn E. McClure, a 115-pound underachiever who some claimed was developmentally disabled, was beaten so severely he was rendered unconscious. An investigation revealed that McClure was a high school dropout with multiple arrests. He never regained consciousness and died on 13 March 1976. Less than a month after the McClure beating, on 3 January 1976, a drill instructor shot recruit Harry W. Hiscock in the hand at Parris Island. Each incident was reported on extensively by the media and resulted in a public outcry.

In May 1976, congressional hearings were held to examine Marine Corps recruiting and recruit training. Several members of Congress had received what they considered an alarming number of complaints about the Marine Corps. Testimony given by former recruits, recruiters, drill instructors, and medical person-

nel painted a picture of widespread abuse and systemic misconduct. Problems ranged from recruiters falsifying documents to recruits being physically and verbally abused. Medical professionals described a system that displayed a reckless disregard for the physical and mental well-being of the young men and women in its charge. One congressman concluded, "Congress finds totally unacceptable any repetition of the kinds of abuses that have befallen my constituents and Marine recruits from other parts of the country. This problem can and must be solved."²³ In addition to recruiting, Headquarters Marine Corps had to reform recruit training lest Congress mandate changes to the process and severely circumscribe the Service's authority. The hearings held in 1976 represented a loss of public prestige and a stunning and very public example of where the combination of recruiting malpractice and recruit abuse could lead.

Headquarters Marine Corps immediately set about reforming recruit training, and General Wilson, who had replaced Cushman in July 1975, is typically credited with the reforms. He was responding, in part, to congressional pressure, however. General Barrow, then serving as Wilson's deputy chief of staff for Manpower, feared that Congress would restrict recruit training, thereby destroying a process that was central to Marine ethos. In an oral history interview, he recalled:

If you didn't do a good job, they [Congress] could turn right around and say, well we're going to tell you how this is going to be done, because we don't think you understand what needs to be done, and so we'll just tell you. It seems like they could have easily said, there will be no drill instructors around recruits after 5:00 p.m. Put them in the squad and let them have free time from the time they go to bed. Things like that. They just impose all kinds of restrictions. . . . So we were in a sense, fighting for our lives, to use a metaphor.²⁴

Congress also considered closing the recruit depots and creating a single armed forces training center with an eye toward saving money and reducing abuse. According to Wilson, "The Congress was fully prepared to take over Marine Corps training, which I believe would have been disastrous, and I had to make some immediate changes in order to ensure that this did not occur."²⁵

In response to the challenge, Wilson and Barrow implemented a far-reaching set of reforms. Concerning recruiting, Wilson announced, shortly after taking office, that by FY 1977, 75 percent of enlistees would be high school graduates. Seventy-five percent was a requirement, not a goal; the Marine Corps would shrink if necessary to attain it.²⁶ According to one general officer, "the Commandant made it clear to all involved in the recruiting business that quotas were

to be considered goals but that quality was a requirement.”²⁷ Also, in June 1976, control of recruiting shifted from Headquarters Marine Corps to the commanding generals of the two recruit depots. This reorganized chain of command gave recruiters a personal stake in who they shipped to boot camp. A recruiter’s Social Security number was recorded in the permanent record of each recruit that they brought into the Corps and their fitness reports were to be based on the number of recruits who completed boot camp, rather than the number who started, as had previously been the case.

In the area of recruit training, recruits would be tested, but they were to be treated with dignity and respect in the process. Changes in philosophy were paired with reforms to standard operating procedures. Limits on attrition were lifted. Rates rose from 10 percent to 25 percent in some cases.²⁸ The option to separate poor performers substantially reduced cases of abuse. The process of screening and training drill instructors was made more rigorous. The number of recruits per platoon dropped from 90 to 75, 68 hours were cut from the program of instruction, and recruits were given 1 hour of free time each evening. For quality-control purposes, Headquarters assigned 84 additional officers, 42 at each depot, to serve as assistant series commanders concerned with supervision and safety. Finally, a degree of transparency was achieved by opening the entire process to public scrutiny. Parents, local officials, and the general public were encouraged to visit the recruit depots to see for themselves how the Corps turned the youth of America into proud men and women. In an interview with *People Weekly*, General Wilson told readers, “I’d like to say that the recruit depots are open to anyone, anytime. Visitors can walk in and watch training or look up any individual they know.”²⁹ Both Wilson and Barrow credited congressional pressure as a primary motivation behind the reforms. In the absence of this pressure, it is unlikely that the Marine Corps would have implemented such a far-reaching, and ultimately effective, set of improvements.

Perhaps the best example of Congress’s role was Wilson’s decision to focus on high school completion as the key determinant of success for a first-term Marine. Wilson is credited with deciding that a high school diploma, rather than an intelligence test, was the best indicator of whether or not a Marine would successfully complete the first enlistment. In fact, as early as 1960, manpower analysts had been arguing the very same thing. A bona fide diploma increased a recruit’s chances of success by 20 to 40 percent, depending on other variables. According to the Naval Health Research Center:

Projects showed, with absolute consistency, that level of schooling achieved, or completion of high school, was the strongest predictor of performance in the Marine Corps. No matter what

was predicted, whether or not a Marine survived two or four years on active duty or performed effectively in combat, the best predictor of success was completion of high school.³⁰

Graduating high school demonstrated a willingness to accept authority and what one researcher termed a “stick-to-it-iveness” that carried over into other areas.³¹

Wilson, however, was not the first to recognize the importance of a diploma. In 1973, Congress had demanded that the Marine Corps increase the percentage of high school graduates. In FY 1974, Congress had included Section 718 in the Defense Appropriations Bill that required the armed forces to enlist at least 55 percent high school graduates. The Marine Corps could not hold to the standard and still make its recruiting mission. Ultimately, General Cushman asked Congress for relief from the requirement, a request that Congress initially denied. Then-Colonel William J. Bowers, an expert on Marine Corps recruiting in the all-volunteer era, described Cushman petitioning Congress to lower enlistment standards as a “spectacle” and a “disastrous” start to modern recruiting efforts.³² Thus, when viewed in light of the events of the preceding three years, Wilson’s decision to require high school diplomas was not as visionary as it seemed, but it was more of a decision to follow through on something Congress had been requesting for years.

Similarly, historians credit General Wilson with discharging thousands of underperforming Marines through what was known as the Expeditious Discharge Program. The initiative, announced in November 1975, eliminated the complicated legal proceedings that had previously surrounded punitive discharges. If a Marine and his commander agreed, the program allowed for a voluntary, honorable, early separation. The only stipulation was that the Marine could never reenlist. The program pushed separation authority down to the battalion level and dramatically reduced the time associated with the process; before implementation of the program, it took weeks and sometimes months to kick someone out of the Corps. Afterward, it took days. According to one judge advocate, administrative discharges “cut out [in] the least expensive way those persons who are not going to succeed, those persons who are nonrehabilitable, and those persons who just can’t hack it.”³³ During the first three months of the program, approximately 2,000 Marines were separated for failing to meet standards; by late 1976, the total was more than 10,000 Marines.³⁴

What is less well known is that Congress had been urging the Corps to adopt just such a program for nearly two years. In 1973, the House Appropriations Committee, alarmed by rising rates of military misconduct, mandated that all Services streamline administrative discharge procedures for underperforming members. At the time, the Army and Navy had already implemented pilot programs. Despite the success the other Services were enjoying, Headquarters Ma-

rine Corps refused to comply. In 1974, Lieutenant General Samuel Jaskilka told the committee that once a Marine made it through boot camp, the Service focused on rehabilitation. Discharge was considered a last resort only reserved for the most egregious offenses.³⁵ In truth, the Corps had gotten into the habit of delaying discharges to preserve end strength. Headquarters Marine Corps refused to implement an expeditious discharge program even after the Government Accountability Office, Congress's independent investigative agency, urged that it do so. The Marine Corps was the only Service without a marginal performer/expeditious discharge program when General Wilson took office.³⁶ Rather than being innovative, the Corps was late to the game when it came to expeditious discharge.

By 1978, quality standards had improved dramatically and incidents of indiscipline had been reduced to manageable levels. Between FY 1975 and FY 1978, the percentage of enlistees who were high school graduates increased from roughly 50 percent to 76.8 percent, desertion rates dropped by 60 percent, the confined population rate fell by 54 percent, and special courts-martial were down by 60 percent.³⁷ Thus, by 1978, the turnaround was so complete that it led one general to proclaim victory in the personnel campaign—a campaign that he regarded as one of the most critical and challenging in the Service's history.³⁸ These positive trends continued into the 1980s. On 15 October 1982, the Marine Corps announced that it had not only met its recruiting goals for FY 1982, but that 90 percent of recruits were high school graduates. By the end of the decade, more than 98 percent of Marines were high school graduates, compared to 50 percent in the early 1970s.³⁹ Historians often credit the turnaround to bold and innovative leadership on the part of Headquarters Marine Corps, however, as Major General Arnold L. Punaro points out, "The senator [Samuel Nunn] who made it happen and the staffer who supported him are, of course, not mentioned in these annals."⁴⁰ It is debatable whether the Corps would have raised enlistment standards or discharged so many underperforming Marines absent pressure from Capitol Hill.

One last factor worth mentioning when it comes to the Marine Corps' ability to recruit high-quality individuals was that massive increases in pay and benefits improved the quality of life for military members. To restore military-to-civilian parity, Congress increased base pay by 11.7 percent in FY 1981 and by 14.3 percent in FY 1982. The result was a 26 percent pay raise in less than two years. Although Headquarters Marine Corps had little to do with the decision, the Service benefited immeasurably from Congress's generosity.⁴¹ As these examples illustrate, Congress played a pivotal role in reforming manpower policies and practices in the post-Vietnam War era.

At the same time that Congress held the Corps to account regarding manpower standards, it also pressured the Service to redefine its strategic relevance.⁴² In the aftermath of Vietnam, the Marine Corps was very much a Service in search

of a mission. Traditionally, it justified its existence by highlighting its capabilities as a rapid response force for third world contingencies and as amphibious shock troops in the event of large-scale, conventional war. The nation's recent experience in Southeast Asia and the subsequent promulgation of the Nixon Doctrine, however, signaled a diminished need for the former role.⁴³ Similarly, the need for massed amphibious assaults—the Marine Corps' *raison d'être* since the interwar period—was considered highly unlikely in a war with the Soviet Union. Some critics went so far as to refer to the Service as an anachronism, “a dinosaur which had outlived its usefulness.”⁴⁴

Of particular concern were critiques by members of Congress and their staffs. As discussed in the previous section on the post-WWII unification crisis, Congress had been a longtime ally of the Corps and repeatedly protected it against budget cutters in the executive branch. The situation in the mid-1970s was unique in that the Service's detractors in Congress and the media were generally fond of the Marine Corps as an organization, and many had a personal connection or familiarity with its history and traditions. However, their belief that the Corps' roles and missions had become so disconnected from the nation's actual defense needs overrode whatever affinities they may have had. The message was plain—the Marine Corps must adapt to present realities or run the risk of strategic irrelevance.

From 1975 to 1978, defense analysts William S. Lind and Dr. Jeffrey Record offered the most cogent analysis of the Marine Corps' shortcomings. The opening salvo came from Lind, then serving as legislative assistant for the Armed Services Committee for Senator Robert A. Taft Jr. (R-OH), as an article in the December 1975 issue of the *Marine Corps Gazette*. Lind urged the Marine Corps to rethink its mission and force structure.⁴⁵ During the next year, Record, then serving as legislative assistant for military affairs on the staff of Senator Samuel A. Nunn Jr. (D-GA), followed up with *Where Does the Marine Corps Go from Here?*, a Brookings Institute study coauthored with Martin Binkin.⁴⁶ Also in 1976, Lind reiterated his arguments in a white paper on defense endorsed by Taft. In 1978, the document was reissued with the endorsement of Senator Gary Hart (D-CO).⁴⁷ Later that same year, Lind and Record coauthored a journal article titled “Twilight for the Corps?,” which neatly summarized their collective assessment. That Lind and Record staffed powerful committees was not lost on senior Marines, and neither was the fact that their views received strong bipartisan support. Longtime supporters of the Marine Corps from both parties endorsed such statements as “the maintenance of almost 200,000 men in an obsolescing force structure cannot be justified,” which caught the attention of Marines at all levels and inspired a period of institutional self-examination to a degree not seen since the early twentieth century.⁴⁸

From their analysis of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Lind and Record conclud-

ed that future wars would be quick, technologically intensive affairs defined by the rapid movement of heavily mechanized forces. In their opinion, the Marine Corps was ill-suited for this type of conflict for two reasons. First, the Corps' amphibious ships would never have gotten them to the war in time. Second, even if the Marines were able to get to the fight, they lacked the armor needed to win on the modern battlefield. Consequently, according to Lind and Record, "The brutal truth is that a growing number of defense analysts regard the Marine Corps as an under-gunned, slow-moving monument to a bygone era in warfare."⁴⁹ Despite such stinging criticism, neither analyst harbored any ill will toward the Service. In fact, both Lind and Record hoped their work would inspire reforms that would enable the Marine Corps to make a positive contribution to national security once again. As such, they recommended detailed solutions to some of the most pressing challenges.

The first challenge, as they saw it, fell under strategic mobility; in other words, how the Corps planned to get to the fight. Lind and Record believed the "principal issue confronting the United States Marine Corps today is the future viability of the amphibious mission."⁵⁰ America's most dangerous adversaries, the Soviet Union, and to a lesser extent China, were land powers whose vast territory and large armies offered few opportunities for a decisive amphibious assault. In a war with either power, amphibious operations could serve as little more than a diversion. This observation directly contradicted a Headquarters Marine Corps effort to write itself into North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) war plans with the northern flank mission. The planning scenario called for the Marine Corps to assist in countering potential European incursions of Warsaw Pact forces by rushing forces to Norway, marrying them up with prestaged gear, and conducting follow-on operations in Western Europe. Although writing itself into NATO war plans helped the Corps survive in the post-Vietnam years, Lind and Record doubted the Corps' utility to NATO. As they saw it, the Corps was simply not configured to fight Soviet mechanized forces. On top of that, a nonnuclear war with the Soviet Union was highly unlikely.

Lind and Record pointed out that criticism of the Marine Corps was not limited to analysts, reporters, and low-level bureaucrats. Senior administration officials and legislators were beginning to question the rationale behind the Corps' existence. The shortage of amphibious shipping led Senator Nunn, previously a strong supporter of the Corps, to doubt the Service's ability to get to the fight: "If the U.S. Marines were called upon to undertake a major landing in the Persian Gulf or elsewhere in the Middle East, they would probably have to walk on water to get ashore."⁵¹ The declining number of amphibious ships and the relative slowness of amphibious transit were highlighted in a 1976 report by the Congressional Research Service, which concluded that deficiencies in amphibious shipping would result in a two-month lead time to launch a division-size operation.⁵²

The Carter years were particularly challenging for the Marine Corps, with its shrinking financial base making force modernization impossible. Under Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, the Corps saw its procurement budget drop from \$326.7 million in FY 1977 to \$283.78 million in FY 1980. Brown also refused to fund the construction of any new amphibious ships or the procurement of the McDonnell Douglas AV-8B Harrier aircraft, the Marine Corps' top aviation priority.⁵³

Defending the Corps against critics in Congress proved challenging to Marines at all levels. Yet, in the process of responding to their critics, the leadership of the Corps refined what it was they wanted their Service to be, namely "an elite air-ground force capable of global deployment," an orientation that the Corps has stuck with to the present. That said, a clear sense of purpose was not enough to free up scarce dollars during the first three years of the Carter administration. According to one Marine general, "You couldn't sell the need for global power projection in the Pentagon prior to events in Iran, Afghanistan, and Nicaragua in 1979."⁵⁴ It would take a major reorientation of national security policy for the Corps to match its capabilities to strategic needs and get the dollars flowing again. The Service needed a mission. It would find one in the chaos and disorder of the Middle East.

On 4 November 1979, Iranian students supportive of the Islamic revolution took dozens of American diplomats hostage. Throughout the 1970s, the United States had relied on the Shah of Iran to maintain stability in the Middle East. By late 1979, the Shah had fled Iran during his country's revolution, and the new governing regime was openly hostile to the United States. The hostage crisis brought to the fore the United States' severely limited military options in the region. To make matters worse, on Christmas Day 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan.⁵⁵ The invasion completely changed the strategic equation. It provided a sense of urgency and enabled proponents of more robust military capabilities to argue a more compelling case for expeditionary forces. From Washington's perspective, it appeared the Soviets were making a play for regional hegemony and control of the region's oil resources.

President Carter laid out his administration's response in his State of the Union Address delivered on 23 January 1980: "Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."⁵⁶ At the time, however, the United States lacked the military capabilities needed to protect the interests identified by policy makers and to enforce the strategic commitments outlined in the Carter Doctrine. Prior to 1980, the United States had interests in the Middle East but limited capacity for projecting force, as evidenced by the Desert One debacle, a failed attempt to rescue the hostages

in Tehran that cost the lives of eight American servicemembers in April 1980.

To remedy this deficiency, the administration placed a renewed emphasis on the rapid deployment force (RDF). The RDF concept was based on prepositioning supplies on ships in the region under what became known as maritime prepositioning and then linking them up with airlifted troops from the rapid deployment force in the event of a crisis. During Carter's final months in office, his administration produced two policy documents that represented a shift in Washington's approach to the Middle East: *Presidential Directive (PD) 62, Modifications in U.S. National Strategy* and *PD 63, Persian Gulf Security Framework*. The former made it clear that a shift in strategic priorities had occurred. American allies in Europe and Asia would be expected to bear more of the burden while the United States redirected its attention to the Middle East.⁵⁷

The reorientation of U.S. strategy brought about by events in the Middle East could not have been more fortuitous for the Marine Corps. During the course of the previous five years, it had repeatedly justified itself to Congress as the nation's expeditionary force in readiness, and now it had an actual adversary and theater of operations to which to tie the claim. The fact that much of the Middle East was accessible from the sea played to the Service's amphibious orientation. In the next several years, the Marine Corps played a leading role in turning Carter's strategic vision into a military reality. Ultimately, it so successfully adapted its capabilities to the challenge that one analyst referred to it as "the core" of the RDF.⁵⁸ Congress appreciated the efforts put forth by the Corps in making the RDF concept a reality. The sudden need for rapidly deployable forces brought about by the Iranian Revolution and Soviet takeover of Afghanistan led to what General Barrow referred to as a rediscovery of the Corps.⁵⁹ By embracing the RDF mission, the Marine Corps benefited significantly from the spending associated with it. Arnold Punaro, the aforementioned Marine reservist and legislative aide to Senator Nunn at the time, told a reporter that the Corps was slated to receive the bulk of the funding associated with the rapid deployment mission. Due to its capabilities in this regard, Nunn continued, "the Marine Corps is the force for the Eighties."⁶⁰ The Service avoided a planned manpower reduction, as a result, and its budget grew by 10 percent in FY 1981 and by another 30 percent in FY 1982.⁶¹ The Marine Corps' newfound strategic purpose, and the spending associated with it, led Barrow to predict the 1980s would be "a kind of golden era" in comparison to the mid-1970s.⁶²

Despite the Corps' newfound relevance and its strong relationship with Congress, by no means did its interests always prevail, a fact that especially held true when they ran contrary to those of the larger Services. For example, the Marine Corps pushed for more amphibious shipping as one of its top priorities throughout the period in question and made little headway because amphibious shipping is not among the Navy's top shipbuilding priorities. In each of his four annual

reports to Congress from 1977 to 1980, Commandant Wilson highlighted what he considered “a critical shortage of amphibious lift.”⁶³ By 1981, the situation reached the point that the head of the Marine Corps’ Amphibious Ships Requirements Branch concluded “amphibious force levels have been repeatedly and arbitrarily lowered to such a point that a glaring mismatch now exists between strategic goals and the amphibious forces available to pursue them.”⁶⁴ In the first installment of *Marine Corps Concepts and Issues*, an annual publication begun in 1981 to keep Congress informed of the Service’s priorities, Headquarters Marine Corps held that “if the United States has an Achilles heel, it is sealift to support contingencies.”⁶⁵ To date, there has been no relief in this area. In 2014, 20 retired Marine generals, distressed by the increased demand for amphibious forces and the declining number of ships, wrote Congress to “highlight concerns” and to request an increase in the number of ships currently programmed.⁶⁶

Apart from the shortage of amphibious shipping and largely as a result of congressional pressure, the Marine Corps entered the 1980s with a clear strategic focus; it was the nation’s force in readiness and the Middle East was the most likely theater of operations. During the course of the 1980s, the Middle East would only grow in importance, while concerns about a war and the focus on Europe diminished with the end of the Cold War. On 1 January 1983, the RDF officially became U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), a permanent unified combatant command. The focus on mobility and readiness was borne out following Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990; it took the United States only a few months to deploy 540,000 combat-ready troops, 2,000 tanks, 1,800 aircraft, and more than 100 warships to the region. The critical point for the Corps was the speed of deployment allowed by maritime prepositioning shipping. The first heavy units on the ground were Marines. Because the equipment and 30 days of supplies were in the ships, the Marines were able to deploy two large expeditionary brigades—17,000 men each, with all their equipment—very quickly. The Marine Corps provided logistical support to some of the first U.S. Army units to arrive in theater.

Due to its broad utility and political savvy, the Marine Corps emerged mostly unscathed during the four major defense policy reviews of the 1990s: the *Base Force* (1990), the *Bottom-Up Review* (1993), the *Commission on Roles and Missions* (1995), and the *Quadrennial Defense Review* (1997). The *Base Force* provides a case in point. Under projected force reductions for FY 1990 to FY 1995, the Army would be reduced from 18 active divisions to 12, the Navy would drop from 16 aircraft carriers to 13 and from 33 ballistic missile submarines to 23, and the Air Force would see its number of active fighter wings slashed from 24 to 15 and its heavy bombers drop from 268 to 181. By comparison, the Marine Corps would remain at three active divisions and three air wings. The Corps’ end strength was reduced from roughly 195,000 to 175,000 between FY 1990 and FY 1995, a 10

percent decrease, but its force structure remained unscathed.⁶⁷ Of the *Base Force* review, General Colin L. Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time, recalled, “The Marines were on somewhat firmer ground. With justification, they presented themselves as the nation’s ‘911’ response force, with or without a Soviet Union.”⁶⁸ Consequently, the size of the Marine Corps relative to the other Services increased in the decade following the Cold War. The Marine Corps made up 9 percent of the total active force in 1988 and 12 percent by 2000.⁶⁹ A similar situation occurred following the drawdown of U.S. forces from Iraq and Afghanistan in recent years. The Marine Corps, having convinced Congress of its utility as a crisis response force, maintained its end strength at the same time that the U.S. Army endured significant reductions.⁷⁰

As these two examples illustrate, Congress plays an important yet somewhat unappreciated role in military innovation. In the 1970s, Congress was one of the few institutions that held the Marine Corps accountable. It continues to do so today as evidenced by recent issues related to sexual assault, hazing, and recruit abuse. At the same time, it is important to note that the Corps was better off as a result of the criticism. It provided the impetus for much-needed reforms.⁷¹

Observations and Recommendations⁷²

Congress and the Marine Corps clearly have maintained a strong connection over the years, through both good times and bad. What is it about the partnership that has made it so effective? Part of the answer is organizational. The Marine Corps established the Office of Legislative Affairs (OLA) in 1952 and over the years has ensured that it has been staffed by highly qualified individuals. The office’s mission statement remains mostly unchanged:

The Office of Legislative Affairs facilitates a shared understanding between the Marine Corps and Congress in order to ensure support for the Commandant’s legislative priorities and requirements, and to maintain the Corps’ unique role within the Joint Force as the Nation’s premier force in readiness.⁷³

As previously mentioned, OLA works directly for the Commandant, while its counterparts in the other Services work primarily for the civilian secretaries of their departments. OLA’s structure and the lines of authority provide Headquarters Marine Corps with a disproportionate degree of influence on Capitol Hill.

The OLA ensures that the Marine Corps speaks with one voice. It provides timely, accurate, and comprehensive responses to approximately 4,000 inquiries per year. Unlike other Services’ liaison offices, OLA serves as something of a gatekeeper. It reviews and tracks all inquiries and responses to ensure consis-

tency, which is particularly important if a constituent wrote multiple members. OLA also meticulously prepares Marines prior to congressional hearings. To that end, OLA provides incredibly detailed briefing books—628 pages for the 2015 confirmation hearing of Commandant General Robert B. Neller—and holds mock hearings known as “murder boards.” Considering the degree of control OLA provides the Commandant when it comes to messaging, the office stands as an excellent example of strategic communications in the political sphere.

The Marine Corps Congressional Fellowship Program is another organizational development that allows for the Marine Corps message to be heard on Capitol Hill. For the past 16 years, this Department of Defense initiative has given active duty officers and senior enlisted Marines the opportunity to work in the legislative branch for one session of Congress. Each year, approximately 15–20 Marines participate. After three months of training, they don civilian clothes and work as congressional staffers for one year. Their typical portfolio includes military and veteran-related issues, though the member is free to use their fellows as they see fit. The fellows are strategically placed in the offices of key committee members or members who have an interest in the Corps. Thus, the fellowship program gives the Corps a window into what Congress as a whole is thinking.

Along with established organizations and programs, there are three aspects of the relationship that are not easily quantified. The first is a reputation for honesty. Although the Marine Corps has official positions typically expressed by the Commandant and OLA, fellows are encouraged to share their personal opinions on issues so long as they differentiate between the two. Every interviewee the author spoke to stressed the importance of being honest with staffers and members. As a result, the Marine Corps has a reputation for conducting honest and open investigations. Historically, this has paid dividends. If Congress sees that the Marine Corps is transparent about its shortcomings, it has been more likely to take a hands-off approach in the crafting of any necessary reforms.

Ultimately, the Marine Corps is confident that if it does enough things right, Congress will be willing to forgive its failings so long as the organization is taking corrective action. In 1980, then-Commandant Barrow expressed his views on the matter in a letter to all commanders:

We do owe the American people a full explanation of what we do as well as what we may fail to do on occasion. . . . Our approach must be one of candor, truthfulness, and timeliness. . . . Commanders are encouraged to provide members of the local community with opportunities for firsthand observation

of Marines. . . . I urge commanders to take every opportunity to tell the Marine Corps story to a wide range of audiences—civilian as well as military—through personal contact and public appearances.⁷⁴

This honest and open approach is valued by staffers and members who work in an environment where trust and honesty are uncommon.

The second aspect is the degree to which the Marine Corps uses its Service culture to its advantage. Marine Barracks Washington, DC, also known as “8th and I,” built in 1801, is the oldest active post in the Marine Corps. The barracks, including the Home of the Commandants, is a national historic landmark and is within walking distance of Capitol Hill. During the summer, the Marine Corps hosts evening parades at the Marine Corps War Memorial (Iwo Jima Memorial) and at 8th and I; senators and representatives are often the guests of honor. Since 1976, the Marine Corps also has sponsored the annual Marine Corps Marathon in Washington, DC. Billed as the “The People’s Marathon,” the Marine Corps encourages maximum participation by not requiring a qualifying time. To foster relations with Congress, OLA and the fellows host a Marine Corps running club on Capitol Hill. Members and staffers are invited to run on a regular basis with Marines in preparation for the marathon. The running club is just one of the many ways that Marines use the camaraderie that defines Marine Corps culture as a way to build relationships.

Figure 2. The start of the 2017 Marine Corps Marathon, Arlington, VA, 22 October 2017



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo, courtesy James Frank.

The cultural ties among fellow Marines combine to create another essential aspect of the partnership between the Marine Corps and Congress. The saying, “once a Marine, always a Marine” is taken quite literally by those who have worn the uniform. Arguably, the single most crucial thing the Marine Corps did during the past 70 years was identify and cultivate relationships with active, retired, Reserve, and former Marines involved in the legislative process. If one examines the various pieces of pro-Marine Corps legislation, they will find that many of the members involved had served in the Corps in some way, shape, or form: the names Paul H. Douglas, Michael J. Mansfield, John H. Glenn, and John Warner come to mind. Headquarters Marine Corps also maintained its ties to staff members with a Marine connection. Interestingly, the fact that two people had both served in the Marines was often enough to overcome partisan differences. For example, in the early 1990s, Congressman Ronald V. Dellums (D-CA), a liberal Democrat and chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, and Commandant Carl E. Mundy Jr., a committed conservative on most issues, found that they could work together on the common ground that both had been Marines.⁷⁵ In terms of sheer numbers, the Marine Corps had fewer former Marines serving than the other Services, but as Aaron O’Connell notes, “What they lacked in numbers, the congressional Marines gained in cohesion.”⁷⁶

Finally, and most importantly, the Marine Corps puts people first. As General Punaro, a congressional staffer, who had nearly 50 years of experience as a reservist, attaining the rank of major general, said, “It was clear to me early on that, in large part, any given person’s success or failure in Washington revolved around personal relationships. People remembered when you went out of your way to help them. They also, for far longer, remembered when you didn’t, so I made sure never to burn a bridge by taking the short-term view.”⁷⁷ Time and again, archival sources and interview subjects highlighted the importance of cultivating personal relationships. In the long run, the Marine Corps’ relationship with Congress can be viewed as an exercise in relationship building. In 1945, the connections were there, but productive working relationships had yet to be built. Ever since the unification crisis, the Marine Corps has made a concerted effort to cultivate and sustain those relationships.

Furthermore, the Marine Corps does not wait for a crisis to start building relationships. It focuses on what one interviewee referred to as the “long-game.” As General Punaro points out, “it was *far more important* to think about the long-term objectives and consequences of a decision than simply calculate the short-term fallout or that day’s rewards.”⁷⁸ The Service cultivates ties to young staffers knowing that someday they will be in important positions, possibly even members themselves. One of the first things General Wilson did when he was confirmed as Commandant was call on all the members of key congress-

Figure 3. Congressional staffers met Marines and got a firsthand look at the Service's equipment and capabilities on Marine Day held at Marine Corps Base Quantico, VA, 27 April 2012.



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo, courtesy LCpl Emmanuel Ramos.

sional committees, all the former Marines in Congress, all members with interests in Marine Corps matters, and his state delegation. Ironically, he considered it nothing more than “renewing old friendships.”⁷⁹ These were relationships he had been cultivating for years. Along these same lines, interviewees all stressed the importance of respect when dealing with members and their staff. Of note, they highlighted the value of treating even the most junior staffer with the same degree of respect that they would treat the member that staffer served.

It should be noted, however, that in recent years the Marine Corps has risked its reputation for putting people and relationships first. During the past three decades or so, the Corps has championed the development of two expensive weapon systems—the tiltrotor Bell Boeing MV-22 Osprey and the General Dynamics Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, a high-speed amphibious vehicle. Some argue that these programs have come to define the Marine Corps in the halls of Congress, and as a result the Corps sacrificed its hard-won reputation as the least bureaucratic of the Services. According to analyst William Lind, who had played an important role in the post-Vietnam War reform era, these programs represented the emergence of a “second Marine Corps” whose “highest goal is programs, money and bureaucratic success ‘inside the Beltway.’” Historically, the Marine Corps’ message to Congress and the American people had been, “We’re not like the other services. We aren’t about money and stuff. We’re about war.” The new message coming from Headquarters Marine Corps in the form of glossy handouts and its testimony before Congress

was, “We are just like the other services. We too are now about money and programs.” In Lind’s opinion, the Service was trading its warrior ethos and reputation for frugality—the very sources of its political support—for costly programs.⁸⁰ While Lind’s critique is overstated, it is not without merit. It is imperative that the Marine Corps continue to focus on building and maintaining relationships based on trust and not emphasize its programs and technology.

Furthermore, the Marine Corps’ efforts to inform and coordinate with other government entities are uneven. Marine liaison efforts with the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development, for example, pale in comparison to what OLA does on Capitol Hill. To more effectively implement so-called whole-of-government solutions to security challenges, the Marine Corps should consider using its relationship with Congress as a model for building enduring partnerships with other agencies as well.

There are also risks that come with being so deeply entrenched on the Hill, particularly as the nation grows increasingly divided politically. Historically, the Marine Corps has pursued a bipartisan approach. However, with the appointment of two retired Marine generals to key positions in the current administration, there is a perception that the Marine Corps has become too closely aligned with a particular politician or party. If the Marine Corps is perceived to be a partisan organization, it could alienate a sizable portion of the American public and their representatives on Capitol Hill. Marines should strive to protect the Service’s reputation for political disinterestedness and partisan impartiality.⁸¹

Conclusions

As illustrated by the examples outlined above, congressional oversight is a good thing for the Marine Corps. In the post–Vietnam War era, the Marine Corps benefited greatly from Congress pushing it to raise enlistment standards and redefine its strategic relevance. In fact, in some cases, such as expeditious discharge, it was Congress that gave the Corps the tools it needed to reform itself. Despite what the Service tells itself, the Marine Corps is highly resistant to change. It often took pressure from the Corps’ friends in Congress, along with concerned Marines and former Marines, to bring about change.

Most importantly, Marines would do well to remember that the Marine Corps’ political power, and by extension its ability to survive and thrive as an institution, has been a direct result of the value Marines placed on building and sustaining personal relationships. The Marine Corps’ relationship with the American people and their representatives in Congress is its political center of gravity. In a 1957 letter to then-Commandant Randolph M. Pate, General Krulak observed that the American people did not need a Marine Corps, but that they wanted one because they were convinced that Marines were upstand-

ing warriors and citizens who stood ready to respond quickly and effectively to national emergencies. However, he concluded his letter on a cautious note:

So long as the people are convinced that we can really do the three things I have mentioned—we are going to *have* a Marine Corps. I feel that is a certainty. And, likewise, should the people ever lose that conviction—as a result of our failure to meet their high—almost spiritual—standards, the Marine Corps will then quickly disappear.⁸²

Whether through inquiries, hearings, or provisions in the National Defense Authorization Act, Congress is how the Marine Corps knows whether or not it is meeting the standards of the American public to which Krulak referred and is sustaining that personal connection. Ultimately, congressional oversight and inquiries, while uncomfortable, are essential to the overall institutional well-being of the Marine Corps.

Notes

1. Austin Long, “The Marine Corps: Sticking to Its Guns,” in *US Military Innovation since the Cold War: Creation Without Destruction*, ed. Harvey M. Sapolsky, Benjamin H. Friedman, and Brenden Rittenhouse Green (New York: Routledge, 2009), 120. In an essay on the Marine Corps in the 1990s, Austin Long wrote: “The Marine Corps is probably the most politically savvy of the services.” It consistently appeared to embrace new missions and then celebrated its own versatility in the form of news releases, public statements, and capabilities exercises, elaborate promotional events put on for the benefit of congressmen and their staffs.
2. Robert D. Heintz Jr., “The Cat with More than Nine Lives,” *Proceedings* 80, no. 6 (June 1954): 659–71.
3. U.S. Const., art. I, § 8. Congress’s authority to provide oversight is derived from cl. 12: “To raise and support Armies”; cl. 13 “To provide and maintain a Navy”; and cl. 14: “To make Rules for the Government and Regulation of the land and naval Forces.”
4. Adam Grissom, “The Future of Military Innovation Studies,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 5 (October 2006): 905–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390600901067>. Grissom defines a *military innovation* as a significant change in how a military organization functions, resulting in a marked increase in military effectiveness. He describes four schools of thought on the sources and explanations of military innovation. He argues that most scholars reached one of four conclusions about why some organizations innovated and others did not: (1) the civil-military dynamic determines whether or not innovation takes place, typically in the form of political leaders driving change from without; (2) innovation is driven by competition among the military Services for limited resources, with each positioning itself to garner the resources associated with a particular role or mission; (3) innovation springs from intra-Service rivalries as different communities—such as infantry, armor, or air—compete to advance their specific vision of what the Service should look like; and (4) a cultural model that regards organizational culture as the determining factor.
5. Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 110. It is worth noting that this book is required reading for all Marines at the rank of sergeant and above.

6. Krulak, *First to Fight*, 32.
7. J. D. Hittle, "The Marine Corps and Its Struggle for Survival, 1946–1947 (The Hittle Report)" (unpublished paper, 15 May 1948, Historical Reference Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA).
8. Gen Alexander A. Vandegrift, "Bended Knee Speech" (speech to the Senate Committee on Naval Affairs, 6 May 1946).
9. Krulak, *First to Fight*, 51.
10. Aaron B. O'Connell, *Underdogs: The Making of the Modern Marine Corps* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 102.
11. O'Connell, *Underdogs*, 112.
12. O'Connell, *Underdogs*, 101.
13. BGen David J. Furness and the staff of the Office of Legislative Affairs, "Marines on Capitol Hill," *Leatherneck*, December 2015, 17.
14. Furness, "Marines on Capitol Hill," 16.
15. Gen Louis H. Wilson (Ret), oral history interview with BGen Edwin H. Simmons, History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, Washington, DC, 1988, 93, hereafter Wilson oral history.
16. BGen Albert E. Brewster (Ret), "The Commandant of the Marine Corps and the JCS: Winning a Seat on the JCS," *Marine Corps Gazette* 92, no. 2 (March 2008): 58–66.
17. Wilson oral history, 17.
18. Krulak, *First to Fight*, 67.
19. Gen Robert E. Cushman Jr. (Ret), oral history interview with Benis M. Frank, History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, Washington, DC, 1984, 359–63. Cushman later described himself as somewhat surprised when "we all of a sudden had the bottom fall out." He attributed his successor's ability to preserve end strength and improve quality to Gen Wilson's close ties with Congress.
20. H. Paul Jeffers and Dick Levitan, *See Parris and Die: Brutality in the U.S. Marines* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1971), 46, 108.
21. Gen Robert H. Barrow (Ret), oral history interview with BGen Edwin H. Simmons, History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, Washington, DC, 1978–94, 648, hereafter Barrow oral history.
22. Bernard Weinraub, "Marine Corps Is Softening the Role of the Hard-Boiled Drill Instructor," *New York Times*, 11 May 1977.
23. LtGen Robert H. Barrow, *Hearings on Marine Recruit Training and Recruiting Programs before the Subcommittee on Personnel of the Armed Services Committee, House of Representatives, 94th Congress, second session*, testimony (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976), 20.
24. Barrow oral history, 24.
25. Wilson oral history, 144.
26. "Today's Marines: A Conversation with the Commandant," *Sea Power*, November 1975, 15–21.
27. Bernard E. Trainor, "The Personnel Campaign Issue Is No Longer in Doubt," *Marine Corps Gazette* 62, no. 1 (January 1978): 26–27.
28. Barrow oral history, 623–25.
29. Clare Crawford, "Boot Camp Should Be Tough, but Never Brutal: Gen. Wilson Tells that to the Marines," *People Weekly*, 13 September 1976, 63.
30. Anne Hoiberg and Newell H. Berry, "There's No Doubt about It, a Diploma Goes a Long Way for Combat Efficiency," *Marine Corps Gazette* 61, no. 9 (September 1977): 60. See also Robert Alan Packard Jr., "Premature Attrition in the U.S. Marine Corps" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 1976).
31. Hoiberg and Berry, "There's No Doubt about It," 60.
32. Col William J. Bowers, "Making Marines in the All-Volunteer Era: Part I: Recruiting, Core Values, and the Perpetuation of Our Ethos, January 1973–May 2014," *Marine Corps Gazette* 98, no. 11 (November 2014): 13.
33. Graham A. Cosmas and LtCol Terrence P. Murray, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Vietnam-*

- ization and Redeployment, 1970–1971* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1986), 364.
34. Maj Ronald R. Borowicz, “Evolution of the Marine Corps Expeditious Discharge Program” (independent research project, Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 31 March 1976), Student Papers and Reports, Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections, History Division, Quantico, VA, 38.
 35. Borowicz, “Evolution of the Marine Corps Expeditious Discharge Program,” 9–10.
 36. *Urgent Need For A Department of Defense Marginal Performer Discharge Program* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Accountability Office, 1975), 9–11. See also Borowicz, “Evolution of the Marine Corps Expeditious Discharge Program.”
 37. M. Brice, “Overview—The Wilson Years,” press release, 30 June 1979, Gen Louis H. Wilson Biographical File. For more specific numbers, see Green Letter no. 1-78, “Report from the General Officers Conference,” 12 January 1978, and Green Letter, “Back-up File,” 1979, Wilson Papers. Special courts-martial, the most serious kind, were reduced from 8,318 in FY 1975 to 4,385 in FY 1977; incidence of unauthorized absence (UA) down nearly 50 percent from 52,200 in FY 1975 to 24,600 in FY 1977; non-end of active service (EAS) attrition, down from a high of 34,100 in FY 1976 to a projected 21,200 in FY 1978.
 38. Trainor, “The Personnel Campaign,” 22. Of the personnel campaign, Trainor wrote: “Few campaigns in Marine Corps history have been so difficult and critical. Few campaigns have been so dramatically marked by defeats and victories. In no other campaign was the future of our Corps so threatened.”
 39. Aline O. Quester, *Marine Corps Recruits: A Historical Look at Accessions and Boot Camp Performance* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analysis, 2010); and Packard Jr., “Premature Attrition in the U.S. Marine Corps,” 8.
 40. According to defense analyst Jeffrey Record, who as a congressional staffer had been one of the Service’s harshest critics in the mid-1970s, “By the end of the 1980s, the Corps boasted the highest manpower quality and lowest rates of indiscipline in its history.” See Jeffrey Record, “Where Does the Corps Go . . . Now?,” *Proceedings* 121, no. 5 (May 1995): 92; and Arnold L. Punaro and David Poyer, *On War and Politics: The Battlefield Inside Washington’s Beltway* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2016), 106.
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72. The author would like to thank the following individuals for improving his understanding of the topic through an interview or agreeing to review a draft: Simba Chigwida, Michael Coyne, John Daly, John Gordon, Benjamin Jensen, Veronica Kaltrider, Amy

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